

SPRIT OF THE DANCE

Keeping the Past Alive at a Kaw Pow Wow

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It's a typical August night in the Midwest. Oppressively hot. Unbearably humid.

The bugs, big bugs, spawned in a nearby lake and summoned by the stadium lights above, swarm in armies to this small, rural dwelling in northern Oklahoma.

Even the muddy, winding, narrow roads the people travel here on seem as ancient and forgotten as the ceremony before them. But they still come. They set up their lawn chairs and they endure it.

They endure it for the beating of the drums that give it a pulse. The chanting of song that gives it a voice. And the spirit of dance that keeps it alive.

The people have gathered to watch the remains of a history, the heritage of a people kept in bloom at the annual Kaw Pow Wow.

Every summer the people of the Kaw Nation, the adopted tribe of the 931st Air Refueling Group, sponsors this Pow Wow on a hill off the banks of Kaw Lake near their home, Kaw City, Okla.

For three nights, visitors are welcome to observe the ritual singing and dancing that helps keep the heritage of Native Americans alive.

But for the Kaw, the three-day event is not only a reunion with their past, it's also an opportunity to reunite with fellow tribesmen and women.

Kaw member James Pepper Henry used to be the director of the Kanza Museum in Kaw City before going to work for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. Like other members who don't live near Kaw City, he flew in for his tribe's annual event and to see

family and friends.

But hours before jumping on a plane back to Washington, D.C., Henry watches the last night of his Pow Wow all too aware of the struggling heritage of his people and the importance of dancing in preserving it.

Henry's Kaw clan, the Eagle clan, was prohibited from dancing the night before due to an inter-tribal dispute. Henry and other members of his clan had performed their dance at each of the last 16 Pow Wows.

The Eagle clan is one of the "only seven or eight" remaining from the original 16 Kaw clans, Henry pointed out. Even his given Kaw clan name, Man-shen-ska, meaning "white plume of eagle," is part of a fading tradition.

"We only have a few people left who can give out those names," Henry said.

Taha Gena Warren, the Kaw Nation's personnel director, is a member of the Weather clan. Her given Kaw name, So-jun-wah, means "where lightning strikes first." Like Henry, Warren watched the Pow

Wow with a close reminder of her tribe's drive to resist a waning legacy. Just a short distance away, memories of Kaw generations lie buried beneath the depths of Kaw Lake.

The lake covers the original Kaw City, where the Kaw were forced to settle when banished from their homelands in Kansas, the state that took its name from the Kaw's original name, the Kanza.

The city's watery grave wasn't an accident. The original Kaw City was plagued by floods that were predicted to worsen. In an effort to speed up inevitability, the Kaw literally packed up the town and relocated to where Kaw City now stands before their original home was intentionally flooded, creating Kaw Lake.

"Yesterday I saw the foundation of the building where I went to school," Warren said with a smile as she described what happens when the lake's water level is low during the summer. It was a bitter-sweet smile, a sign of happiness that the entity that holds her childhood memories allowed her a peek back into time.

At the Pow Wow, where spectators are given a glimpse into the heritage of a people, visible smiles aren't easy to find. The faces seem stoic, reverent. Smiles aren't visible on the outside; they peer out from the inside. Smiles of respect, admiration and appreciation.

Like the foundations of a drowned schoolhouse, the Pow Wow emerges from the night to show all the Kaw Heritage is alive, its pulse felt through the drum, its voice heard in the song and its spirit seen in the dance.



(Above) The footwear of a Pow Wow dancer waits in the grass before being needed in the nighttime activities. (Left) A dancer competes in the Men's Fancy category of the Pow Wow. The dancers' vivid, flaring regalia, the proper name of Native American dress, makes Fancy dancing one of the most popular Pow Wow dances.

(Right) A Kaw member adorned in classic Kaw dress, or regalia, participates in the Grand Entry of the 2003 Kaw Pow Wow near Kaw City, Okla. The Kaw Nation is the adopted tribe of the 931st Air Refueling Group. His headdress, or roach, is the 931st's adopted symbol. The roach's feather symbolizes a halo that protects Kaw warriors. (Below) At the center of the Pow Wow circle is the drum and Kaw singers. Unlike other tribes, the Kaw dance counterclockwise so that their hearts are closest to the drum, believed to produce the "heartbeat of the earth."

